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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the activities and outcomes of a program in literacy education for the deaf funded by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. The "L.E.A.D." program began in El Paso, Texas, on September 1, 1995, and ceased operations on July 31, 1997. The program was designed to improve communication in economically disadvantaged families with parents who are deaf and who have hearing children in order to enhance the children's future social interactions and the reading, writing, and oral/sign skills of family members. A total of 18 parents and 30 children participated in the program. The program was divided into two components: classroom instruction and home visits. Classroom instruction was further divided into three components: family literacy, computer literacy, and academic literacy. Results from the program indicate the classes and home visits had a very positive effect on the families. There has been considerable increase in communication between parents and children and families looked forward to coming to the classes and to the home visits. Often the children looked for guidance in hearing adults and the classes served as a mechanism for children to ask their parents for guidance. This also encouraged the entire families to learn a standardized form of communication. (CR)

Taking the "L.E.A.D." in Family Literacy

Literacy Education Action for the Deaf

Final Report

Project Term:

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The Barbara Bush Family Literacy Education for the Deaf (LEAD) program started operating in El Paso on September 1st 1995 and ceased operations on July 31st 1997. The program was designed to improve communication in economically disadvantaged families with Deaf parents of hearing children in order to enhance the children's future social interactions and to enhance reading, writing and oral/signed skills of family members.

These families have and will continue to face overwhelming barriers. Poverty is a major obstacle to a family's ability to access educational, health, cultural and social services needed for its members to participate fully in our society. If poverty is combined with Deafness, the ability of a family to access much needed services increases exponentially.

Pre-lingual Deaf adults who did not acquire a sign language during their early childhood and their hearing children are at a great formative disadvantage. For hearing people, language acquisition begins at birth, where, the world is encoded through a sound based linguistic system (sound/images-signifier/signified). For pre-lingual Deaf people, the world cannot be encoded through a sound based language. Therefore, the semiotical process must be facilitated by image language (sign/image-signifier/signified). Unfortunately our pre-lingual Deaf students have not been exposed to a visual sign language until much later in life (if at all). Ultimately, these parents are lagging in their own linguistic development which seriously limits their ability to facilitate the linguistic development of their children.

Furthermore, El Paso's Deaf population presents unique characteristics. This is because three formal language systems exist in the border. These are American Sign Language, Mexican Sign Language, and Signed English. Deaf people in the border tend to combine these three systems with some home signs that they may have also acquired. For their hearing children, the lack of linguistic guidance from their parents and the exposure to both oral English and Spanish confuses and complicates the picture. Lack of research and lack of services provided for this population have resulted in little current knowledge of the needs of the target population and on how to address them. For these reasons, this project not only became an opportunity to provide instruction to this community, but for our program to acquire new knowledge about this population in order to enhance services.

Several things have been accomplished throughout the past 23 months. A total of 18 parents and 30 children were recruited to participate in the program. Recruitment was conducted by the following means:

1. The El Paso Center for the Deaf was asked to refer participants to the program
2. Home visits were made to Deaf families.
3. Schools were asked to refer children of Deaf parents.
4. Program Facilitator attended activities for the Deaf in El Paso in order to gain the trust of the Deaf community.
5. Audiologists were asked to refer their clients.
6. The WIC office was asked to refer clients.
7. Presentations and flyers were distributed in the above listed locations and throughout the community.

It was originally anticipated that more families would be served. However, since this type of program is new, we were completely unaware of the challenges that we would face in serving this population. In the process of recruitment we realized that most Deaf people tend to isolate themselves and are afraid to seek services. We also determined that these families would need

challenges that we would face in serving this population. In the process of recruitment we realized that most Deaf people tend to isolate themselves and are afraid to seek services. We also determined that these families would need a lot of individual attention. Therefore, it would have been virtually impossible to adequately serve more families over the past 23 months.

Of the attending parents, 17 were Deaf and one was hearing. Twenty seven children were hearing and 3 were Deaf. The program was intended to serve Deaf parents of hearing children. One hearing parent with Deaf children was invited to participate. This was done to broaden the awareness of all participants regarding the challenges that different populations face. In order to assess the skills of the parents, a very simple signed and written assessment was conducted with each of the parents. It was determined that 11 parents communicated with either some little Mexican Sign Language, or some American Sign Language, and the rest of the parents used home signs. Five hearing children could sign some ASL, the three Deaf children could sign ASL, and 22 children used home signs. Most of the children would communicate with the parents through home signs. The majority of the parents could write their name, address and phone number. However, they could not answer questions like: What school does your child attend?; Can you help your children with their homework?; Can you communicate with your child's teacher?

In order to address the educational needs of the families the program was divided into two components. The two components were classroom instruction and home visits. Classroom instruction was further divided into three components. The components were family literacy, computer literacy and academic literacy.

Family literacy was the main focus of classroom instruction. In order to address the need for better language proficiency for families a curriculum was adapted for the program. The curriculum was originally developed for a program called FIEL (Family Initiative for English Literacy). The curriculum includes the following five steps:

1. Initial Inquiry: this is an oral activity that helps the families link their prior knowledge to the lesson's theme
2. Learning Activity: This is designed to be hands on and involves the families working in teams
3. Language Experience: The purpose of this activity is for families to acquire new vocabulary related to the day's activity
4. Reading Activity: Family members read to each other in order to expose the members to the beauty of family reading while strengthening both communication skills and vocabulary.
5. Home Assignment: Designed for families to utilize new acquired knowledge outside of a classroom context.

The curriculum was adapted to include American Sign Language. In the lessons, new vocabulary was introduced through pictures, written English and Spanish, and American Sign Language. Once the new vocabulary was introduced, reading took place. During the reading activity, families sat together, and while one individual read and another signed. The learning facilitators, the children and the parents switched roles of being readers, interpreters or listeners/watchers. Readings varied to meet the skills of the learners. Often a reading consisted of a word coupled with a sign and an illustration. After the reading activity families reviewed new acquired language.

Some other learning activities conducted during class involved arts and crafts. These included the making of scrolls, paper mache objects, hats, log cabins with lollipop sticks, picture frames and collages. These were executed by families working as teams. A lot of the learning activities were presented in thematic units. For example, the month of February was devoted to learn

about Saint Valentine, March was devoted to Saint Patrick's, and April was devoted to Easter.

In order to introduce participants to technology, families interacted with computers. Four multimedia computers were available to the families. These computers offered the participants an opportunity to interact with a totally new media which most had never seen. This was particularly important for children who are often at a disadvantage when they encounter this type of media in school situations. Computers became a great tool to foster interaction between parents and children. Children learned computer skills faster than the parents and were encouraged to teach their new learned skills to their parents.

Finally, academic literacy was offered to the parents once a week. This was done so that the parents could familiarize themselves with their children's homework, and so that they could begin helping their children with some of the homework.

Home visits were an essential component of this program. For the past twenty-three months, facilitators visited program participants once a week for two to four hours. This allowed us to gain a better understanding of the interaction among family members. During home visits, facilitators showed families how to do activities together. These usually included cooking together, doing arts and wood crafts, and reading together. Many activities done during the home visit were extensions of classroom activities. Home visits also allowed facilitators to observe new learned skills. In addition, the facilitators suggested techniques for the improvement of parenting skills. This was done to show parents how to be positive role models for their children. The techniques included rewarding children for behaviors that the parents wanted to encourage. Facilitators found that the children were starved for some guidance, and with a few pointers parents could begin to gain some control.

For the staff, the project served as a unique opportunity to learn about this unique population. The particular difficulties that exist in families with Deaf parents are exacerbated when also dealing with poverty, lack of exposure and multilingualism which are common issues that these families confront.

Following are a few of the things that we have learned about Deaf culture over the 23 months. The learning facilitators observed that there originally was very little communication between the parents and the children. The little communication that existed was handled through very rudimentary home signs. Children were often embarrassed of their parents and they did not respect them. In addition they seemed to carry a lot of anger and frustration. Parents did not have any control of their children, and they did not know how to discipline them. Children often scratched, bit, threw things at their parents, ran away from them, and did not cooperate. On the other hand, parents did not know how to get involved in their children's lives, and did not realize the importance of family group activities.

In terms of situations outside the home, the children of Deaf parents were not used to conversing as much as other children. In addition, they were used to hearing Deaf voices if they heard any voices at home at all. Therefore, their conversational skills, as well as their pronunciation skills, were often deficient. Another problem was that these children tended to be very loud since their parents could not hear the noise that they made while playing. Some of these children tended to have a lot of authority and power over their parents. This is because the children become the means of contact between their parents and the outside world. For these reasons, the children also made a lot of the decisions that adults would commonly make.

When in school, these children and their families were often misunderstood. Children were perceived as loud and rude and their parents were seen as mentally handicapped. This is a common problem that happens when teachers do not realize that they are working with children brought up by undereducated Deaf parents.

The classes and home visits had a very positive effect on the families. There has been a considerable increase in communication between the parents and the children. Families looked forward to coming to the classes and to the home visits. Often times children looked for guidance in hearing adults. The classes served as a mechanism for children to ask their parents for guidance. This also encouraged the entire families to learn a standardized form of communication (in this case ASL). The home visits have provided a medium to observe the increased communication between the children and the parents. Facilitators observed that with some guidance towards developing positive parental role models, doing group activities and the added vocabulary acquisition resulted in improved communication among families and an increased respect from the children towards their parents.

Another important goal in our project was to communicate to teachers and school administrators the barriers that these families faced within the school system. In order to do this a letter was developed and distributed in the schools. The letter has been revised several times. The latest version reads as follows:

Dear Teacher:

I come from an economically disadvantaged family with Deaf parents. Poverty is a major obstacle to any family's ability to help their children access educational, health, cultural and social services needed for its members to participate fully in our society. If poverty is combined with Deafness, the ability of a family to access much needed services increases exponentially.

My parents have also had a very limited education. As a result, of my parents lack of education, poverty and Deafness, my experiences as I was growing up have been different from those of other children. For example, because my parents are Deaf, they do not voice as much as hearing parents. Therefore, my exposure to oral conversations is very limited. In addition, since Deaf people voice different from hearing people, I have learned to voice the way my parents do.

Usually, I am very noisy because my parents cannot hear me. Teachers sometimes complain that I talk to much. Since I do not get to converse around my house, school becomes my only outlet. Because I am noisy and loud, I am perceived as rude. However, I am not.

In many cases, I am the only connection between my parents and the hearing world. Because of this, my parents often look to me for guidance, and I get more authority than other kids my age.

In order to deal with me, you must be patient. If you feel that I have speech problems, you need to refer me to the speech therapist, and to a resource phonics class. Furthermore, you need to show me how to behave like other children. In terms of my linguistic ability, I have different learning skills. For example, I do not have a linguistic concept of past or future and I relate more to visual cues.

Regarding homework assignments, my parents often cannot help me. Therefore, I may need after school tutoring.

If you need to communicate with my parents, please call the El Paso Center of the Deaf at 544-6032 and ask for the case manager. They can provide you with an interpreter. In addition, please encourage my parents to come to school and visit my classes. My parents are very shy, and they isolate themselves from the hearing world. Therefore, they need a lot of encouragement. Please do not use me as the interpreter, I do not like to do this. In addition it can be sometimes unsafe and it is considered illegal. Please get a professional interpreter. In addition, you can call my parents over the phone with a TDD, or through Relay Texas # 1-800-735-2988.

Deaf people are very misunderstood. This letter will not make you aware of everything about my parents. However, it will give you some basic idea. Assistance for the Deaf is currently scarce. Please have patience with me.

Sincerely,

Your student

Using this letter, we have developed an information brochure. The brochure is attached.

There is a lot of work to be done to serve this population better. We only reached a total of eighteen families in this community. Furthermore, this was the first program of its kind. It is hoped that more programs like this emerge throughout the country. More work needs to be done to better understand this population and to mobilize resources to serve them.

This report will be submitted to educational journals. The information gathered during the past 23 months is currently unavailable in educational literature. This report will serve to inform the field regarding some of the challenges that are faced by this population.

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Talking to me and my parents!

Learn more about Deaf Culture!

There are lots of ways to learn about the beautiful world of Deaf Culture. Here are some of my favorites:

El Paso Community College
Literacy Center
PO Box 20500
El Paso, Texas 79998
Voice/TDD (915) 534-4602
andresm@epcc.edu

El Paso Center of the Deaf
511 Executive Center Blvd.
El Paso, Texas 79912
Voice/TDD (915) 544-6032

Relay Texas 1-800-735-2988

Relay Texas allows people who voice and hear to communicate with deaf people who have a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD).

Talking to me and my parents! is a production of the El Paso Community College Literacy Center and the Deaf Community in El Paso, Texas. Its development was supported by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. For more information or copies of this brochure, please contact the El Paso Community College Literacy Center. This brochure may be modified and redistributed in your schools with attribution to EPCC. Contact us for a free diskette copy. The El Paso Community College does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, or disability.

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El Paso Community College
and the
Barbara Bush Foundation
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Talking to me and my parents!

A Guide for Teachers of Hearing Children with Deaf Parents



El Paso Community College Literacy Center
PO Box 20500
El Paso Texas
Voice (915) 534-4111 TDD (915) 534-4602
andresm@epcc.edu

I am a hearing child with deaf parents—I want you to understand some things so I can succeed in your classroom!



I live in a different culture!

Deaf Culture is exciting and fun for me, but I am a hearing child. I live in two worlds, two cultures. I don't understand all the rules of either. You are my teacher for the hearing culture. Learn with me!

My parents may be able to sign fluently and read, or they may not. In El Paso, many deaf adults have limited or no schooling and use a combination of Mexican Sign Language, American Sign Language, home sign, and Signed English. There are lots of sign languages! I may not know as much sign as they do.

Like deaf people, I am a visual learner. Like hearing people, I like to talk, but I may not read very well. Like the parents of lots of other hearing children, my parents may be poor in money, but they are rich in caring. They have a lot to share and will welcome you into the beautiful and special world of Deaf Culture.

My parents get to experience the world in a way that you and I will never be able to—get to know them! Visit our home (don't forget your interpreter) and meet my family and my parents' friends. Show them my schoolwork and textbooks. Remember—it's your responsibility to take the initiative! You are very important to me and my parents.



I can be very loud and talkative in class!

I don't hear voices at home, or I hear deaf voices. I don't learn to control how loud I may be speaking—and I love to talk. School is where I have the opportunity to talk to hearing people! Teach me how to modulate my voice and talk when it's appropriate—but let me talk!



Sometimes I don't pronounce words very well or I don't know what they mean!

I hear deaf voices at home—I may benefit from speech therapy. Please work with me in the classroom. I am of normal intelligence and I learn just as quickly as other children. I just need to learn some things at school that other children learn at home. Oh—if I move my hands when I talk, let me. I may be signing. Remember—I am a very visual learner. Deaf Culture is a visual world and the hearing world is auditory. I knew my deaf parents first and hearing people later. I'm not deaf, but I may think like a deaf person.



My parents want me to succeed in school!

My parents usually can't help me with my homework, and they may not understand what you want from the notices you send home. Invite them to a parent-teacher conference or visit them at home. Just remember to bring a qualified interpreter for all conversations. You can call the El Paso Center of the Deaf at 544-6032 for a qualified interpreter. And help me get into extra-curricular activities like scouts, sports, the arts, after school programs, and other fun things that help me learn and live in the hearing world.



I can be very boisterous and active at school!

I love school! I get to play with other hearing children and have access to lots of things I may not have at home—like books, scissors, and toys. My parents don't have a lot of money to buy me things. It's hard for them to get an education and a good job. My parents have a difficult time controlling my behavior at home, and I frequently don't learn many rules. After all, they can't hear what I'm up to, and that's fun for me! You can help me learn how to behave in the hearing world.



I'm a kid, not an interpreter for my parents!

Lots of people think I am an interpreter for my parents—and that's hard on me. I'm just a kid. Call the El Paso Center for the Deaf or talk to the principal of your school. Get a qualified interpreter—it's my parents' right and besides, there can be legal consequences if you don't. And it let's me be just a kid!